



## Transcript for “The Historical Novel”

An Audio Program from This Goodly Land: Alabama’s Literary Landscape

Interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. Bert Hitchcock, Professor emeritus, of Auburn University discuss the historical novel. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land*’s audio program about the historical novel. I’m Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. Bert Hitchcock, Professor emeritus, of the Auburn University Department of English.

It’s good to have you with us today, Dr. Hitchcock.

Dr. Hitchcock: I appreciate being invited, Maiben, thanks.

Ms. Beard: Let’s start by talking about what we mean when we call something a “historical novel.” Some people say that novels about events that occur during an author’s lifetime should be considered “period novels,” not “historical novels,” and that “historical novels” can only be written about events that occurred before the author was born. Is this a valid distinction?

Dr. Hitchcock: This gets us right away into the swamp of language usage and all the complications and complexities of language, which is both a curse and a blessing, a joy and a curse. I would use the term “contemporary novels” for any novel that is set in the present time, and I think of “period novels” or even “costume novels” as those about any particular period dealing with the manners and behavior and indeed the costumes and the manners of any particular time.

A “historical novel” is very broadly considered to be a novel that is set in (that is whose characters live in and whose events occur at) a time or a period that is not contemporary with the time in which the book is published or the author’s lifetime. In other words, it would be one in which contemporary readers would not find a familiar world, one that they had personally experienced. How remote or far away that time should be from the time the novel is published and first read has been a matter of a good bit of conjecture. People have tried to define it: “Well, it needs to be at least twenty-five years” or “it needs to be at least a century.” Sir Walter Scott, at the beginning, set it at about half a century—sixty years to be more exact.

So it's fairly complicated, and one person has even claimed that all novels are historical or will become historical as time passes. I think it is possible to write a novel dealing with contemporary time that sees that as a continuum of history and it's going to affect history ahead. But generally, a historical novel will be set at a time and place that is in the past from the time in which it's published and written.

Ms. Beard: Are "Westerns" a form of historical novel or are they a separate category? How about murder mysteries set in historic time periods?

Dr. Hitchcock: I would say that Westerns are historical novels, but here again, there are complications of categorization. Something doesn't need to be exclusively one thing or another. That's true of novels, it's true of trucks; a truck can be a certain make, it can be white, it can have four-wheel drive, it can have an extended cab or a regular cab, on and on. Certainly that's true of novels. They can be a whole lot of different things.

A Western novel does deal with a time past. Probably what we're talking about is what's emphasized, what's the dominant element in it. But the categories and classifications and descriptions are not exclusive or absolute, and we probably shouldn't be so restrictive. It depends on what readers are looking for. I want to read something about the West—I want those saloon doors to be swinging, I want the six-shooters to be firing, I want the big hats—I want the Westerns. But it could be a murder mystery, it could be an adventure, it could be a romance story, love, any number of things.

Long answer to your question: Westerns, American Westerns, are historical, yes.

Ms. Beard: How careful have writers of historical novels been to maintain accuracy with respect to events, people, social customs, etc.? Is it possible to learn history from a work of fiction?

Dr. Hitchcock: Let me answer your second question first. Certainly a lot of people *think* so. There are lots and lots of bibliographies, for example, one title is *America as Story*. But there are bibliographies, lists of books that are intended for students of high school and junior high, that say "Here are some books that will make history exciting for students" (they think it's boring otherwise). A lot of people do believe you can learn history from a work of fiction, evidently.

A problem, though, is exactly what you mean by "learning history." That term seems to have a foundation of our believing that there's a body of objective fact, and again it's complicated and more complex than simply that. There are certain basic facts of history, I guess, such as who won a war, but there are an awful lot of things that are subject to interpretation, varying interpretations. But, by and large, I think a lot of people certainly do think it is possible to learn history from a work of fiction.

Writers exhibit a wide range of intents and purposes and work habits in writing historical fiction. Some are quite concerned about what they see as historical accuracy and do quite a bit of research in order to make that as accurate as possible. One distinction that is sometimes made is between the "recovered past" and the "felt past": "I want to look at documents, and I want to recover the past as accurately as possible." Another approach would be to say: "I just want to try

to capture the feelings and passions of the people, and I am not going to deal quite so much with the social historical past as with other things.”

The writer’s intent (and of course the effect, which isn’t always the same as the intent): one comment by a writer that I remember was Charles Frazier’s talking about *Cold Mountain* and what he was trying to do there. And he said (this is fairly close to what he said) that for this novel, he was going to let fiction drive and history ride. In other words, he wanted to tell the story. The novel was the first thing he was concerned about and that was what was dictating what he did and history rode along. Some people who read that novel may not see it the same way.

Ms. Beard: Tell us about the origins of the historical novel.

Dr. Hitchcock: Sir Walter Scott is pretty universally recognized as being the father of the historical novel, beginning with the novel *Waverley* (and others that followed after that) published in 1814. Scott clearly, I think, realized he was starting something new. He talked about what his novel was not. He said it’s not a chivalric romance, and it’s not a novel of manners. And the subtitle of *Waverley* is ‘*Tis Sixty Years Since*, so he set it back just a little over a half century, two or three generations removed, so there is some familiarity, but not very much, with that time.

Scott thought novels (and his novels *did*) deal with a time of conflict, of drama, and have some effect on the present. He talked about the changes; we could see how things used to be, and, in fact, maybe some refinement of manners since those earlier times. He did talk about some moral purpose and what he did. He talked about entertainment, and he pretty clearly distinguished that this was not dealing with antiquity, it was not dealing with the present. He said that going way back in time or dealing with the *present* present is the best way to show manners; if we want to see how people act differently, we go way back or we look at what we can see every day. He went back a little bit in time. Scott is considered to be the father of the historical novel, and he set a trend that was picked up in his native Great Britain and ultimately all over the world.

Ms. Beard: Who were the first American authors to write historical novels?

Dr. Hitchcock: Scott’s novels came at a key time, we can say in retrospect, just after the French Revolution and American Revolution. So Americans were very quick to pick up on Scott, partly because of, in some sense, a national basis, a sense of community (with Scott it was the Scots). But America was a new nation looking for an identity and a sense of community and also an attempt to establish itself artistically. So Americans just jumped on Scott, and a lot of American writers began writing in that vein in the Eighteen Twenties and Eighteen Thirties.

The major American writer, who was sometimes called the “American Scott,” was James Fenimore Cooper. Going back to the Revolutionary War—America didn’t have much of a past, but we felt we *needed* a past to be a great nation and to produce great literature, so we used what we had, and the Revolutionary War was ready-made for that. Also, frontier Indian conflict was picked up often as a subject. So there were many many authors in the Eighteen Twenties, Eighteen Thirties, and Eighteen Forties who followed Cooper’s example.

As I say, Cooper was called the “American Scott,” and there was a Southern writer, William Gilmore Simms from South Carolina, who was called the “Southern Cooper.” Simms wrote a long series of historical novels, many of them dealing with the Revolutionary War. But there is a long list: New Englanders and Southerners, and they were appealing to the sense of nationalism for Americans at this time. Scott’s novel fit in well with this.

Ms. Beard: Has the popularity of these novels changed over the years?

Dr. Hitchcock: The answer to that is, I think, yes and no, but mainly no. Some literary historians have talked about peaks of popularity of historical novels. Certainly the period before 1850 (from 1820 to 1850) and a little beyond was a high point. There are also some that think there was an increase in interest at the end of the century (we can go into the reasons for this if you want to or possible reasons for it) and again in the American Nineteen Thirties and Nineteen Forties.

But in fact, for a hundred and fifty to two hundred years, the historical novel has been a consistent good seller, if not bestseller. So there is a lot of consistency in this. Some literary trends and bugs have come and gone, but historical novels were popular reading in earlier Nineteenth Century America, and they have continued to be all the way into the Twenty-First Century.

Ms. Beard: In the Nineteenth Century, who was the target audience for American historical novels?

Dr. Hitchcock: I mentioned readers who were concerned about being an American. There were also those readers (early on and continuing) who were reading novels as escapism, a chance to be somewhere else than where they were, and also to be educated. So again, there were a variety of people who were reading, both males and females. Patriotism was one element there, people who were interested in that. Scott had also helped pave the way a little bit for being able to react to the claim that novels were immoral. This characterized the earlier part of the Nineteenth Century. So there were educational reasons for reading novels, some moral lessons being taught there, creation of a sense of community. It really appealed, I think, to a lot of people.

Ms. Beard: How has the audience changed since then?

Dr. Hitchcock: The reading audience has become, of course, much, much bigger. Books are not as expensive as they once were, but I think these appeals are still there. The reasons that we read fiction, for entertainment and instruction, are still there. The public has certainly expanded a great deal with mass means of producing books and so forth.

Ms. Beard: What kind of person writes historical novels? Has this changed since the early days?

Dr. Hitchcock: People write novels for different reasons, of course, some of which they talk about, some of which they don’t. A person can write fiction, and perhaps particularly historical novels, to make money. Writers need to make a living, and historical novels have a proven record of being appealing to readers.

The interest might be art, it might be philosophical, and again, I think, largely the reasons for writing fiction have remained the same. There is, in some ways, less of a nationalistic intent than characterized the early days of the American historical novel, and yet that patriotic underlying appeal is always there. There's always some sort of national crisis or situation that needs to be addressed.

So persons write historical novels, I think, for different reasons. Sometimes a person becomes interested in a character or an event that he or she happens to discover, finds not much about it in the historical documentary record, and wants to find out more. One novelist describes what he does as illuminating the darkness; he has questions, he want to find out about that, so he or she writes for that reason, which is leaning more towards art than simply money-making.

Ms. Beard: How have contemporary political and social issues influenced historical novels?

Dr. Hitchcock: Certainly I think they influence any novel, but maybe particularly historical novels. One sees certain problems, events, situations of one's own times, and looks for some historical precedent—perhaps to shed some light or to tell them or their readers how better to deal with that.

All humans—all writers—are cultural products. They look at the world as their society has taught them to look at the world. So, not-far-past or contemporary issues certainly influence the way they look at the world. One particular example of that might be at least the claim that Victorian society in England by the end of the Nineteenth Century was pretty well dictating that there should be some moral lessons in historical novels. That had not always been the case before, but that culture began to push that a little bit as a requirement, and we certainly do see it reflected in the novels.

Ms. Beard: How have historical novels, in turn, influenced politics and society?

Dr. Hitchcock: Maybe two examples that I think of (and others can think of many more): one is Alex Haley's *Roots*, which I think (and in both of my examples not just the novel but also the movies that were made from them but beginning with the novels) had a tremendous impact on politics and society. *Roots* was published in 1976, the Bicentennial year, but it called attention to a community of Americans whose past we had paid some attention to but not in the way that Haley did. I think *Roots* had a tremendous effect on society and also politics.

Another different one: perhaps (certainly in America) the most famous, well-known, historical novel of all time, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, which was published in 1936 and created the South for many readers, rightly or wrongly. It gave us some iconic views of the South and Southern history, for good and ill, I think. So those are just two examples of how I think historical novels have influenced politics and society.

Ms. Beard: What have the attitudes of literary critics been towards historical novels over the years?

Dr. Hitchcock: Generally down, I think. They have not thought too favorably of them. As time has gone along, the great popularity of historical novels has created works all along a long line, including those that are very formulaic, intended to appeal to sex and sensationalism, give it a little historical setting.

Maybe the two strongest words that I have heard used by serious critics have been “impurity” and “vulgarity” with regard to historical fiction. The “impurity” refers in part to a longstanding, and I guess what will be a continuing, discussion about literary fiction, and that is: How can you combine fact and fiction? We have come to recognize (as we have generally with the idea of history) that it’s more complicated than we used to think. But it’s impure, it’s an impure product to start with; you take the facts of history and mix them with fiction or you take fiction and mix it with the facts of history. As I say, we come back to the novelist’s intent there; does the person intend to write a novel as history, or does the person intend to write history as a novel?

But in broad terms, back again to problems with language, the term “historical romance” or “historical novel” has come to refer in general to paperback pulp fiction, sex and sensationalism, formulaic fiction. The same thing is going to happen no matter when it’s set, but we set it back in time. A person doesn’t have to deal with contemporary problems; it goes back in time to perhaps an exotic past. The past is set and you can’t do anything about it; you just escape your own situations there.

So, I would say attitudes of literary critics generally have been down because I guess that they think the writer’s imagination and creativity have been minimized if you are dictated to by certain historical facts. And yet again a problem with language here; almost every major American novelist and non-American novelist has written a historical novel. We kick that list off, on and on, maybe at the pinnacle is Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, but they have written historical novels. Some of our greatest novels are regarded as historical, even broadly, not quite so esoteric. It depends in part I think on the surface and the depth. We have generally seen with serious fiction a moving inward, not so much dealing with surface elements of a different time with those manners, but getting into individual psychology.

And this goes back to Scott again. Scott said that he was more concerned with the passions of man than the manners of man, and he preferred (again he wrote in the preface to *Waverley*) to deal with this time of sixty years past in order to do that. But he wanted to draw, and this is his term, from the book of nature, not the book of documentary history. So, in this sense, from the beginning, writers have been dealing with universal questions, as Scott said, with the passions and actions of men that are not affected by what they wear or the culture of their time. And this is what serious literature is supposed to do.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Hitchcock.

Dr. Hitchcock: I’ve enjoyed it, Maiben, thanks.

Ms. Beard: We’ve been talking about the historical novel with Dr. Bert Hitchcock, Professor emeritus, of the Auburn University Department of English.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. You can find additional resources on this topic when you visit us at [www.alabamaliterarymap.org](http://www.alabamaliterarymap.org).

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